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WHO Director-General candidates: does mental health feature within their visions of leadership?

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Dear Sir,

Mental health is a priority of the World Health Organisation (WHO), and a fundamental component of WHO's definition of health¹. Mental health also cuts across many of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals^{2,3}, particularly Goal 3 on health and well-being⁴. WHO's work is closely aligned with achieving these goals.

The WHO Director-General determines global health priorities. A new Director-General is elected in May 2017, from the following candidates: Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, Dr Flavia Bustreo, Professor Philippe Douste-Blazy, Dr David Nabarro, Dr Sania Nishtar, and Dr Miklós Szócska. To understand the candidates' positions on mental health, we scrutinised their written statements, professional backgrounds⁵, manifestos, and answers regarding WHO priorities⁶, alongside a consideration of their presentations at the Director-General Candidates' Forum in November 2016⁷.

Considering background experience, Dr Bustreo worked as a clinician at a hospital for mentally and physically handicapped patients during 1990-1991; Dr Nishtar has been a member of the WHO expert review group on an integrated response to mental health and other chronic diseases since 2013; and Dr Szócska collaborated with WHO on issues such as mental health as Minister of State for Health during 2010-2014.

Regarding future vision, Dr Ghebreyesus' manifesto includes 'mental health conditions' as an example of disorders he would target through advancing universal health coverage and service access, and an example of disorders that can be prevented, detected early and managed through strong health systems.

Dr Bustreo's statement reflects on the WHO's objective of securing higher 'physical, mental and social health and well-being' for people. She also mentions 'highest attainable mental and physical health' and proposes that to achieve this the WHO needs to better understand the changing funding landscape.

Professor Douste-Blazy's statement outlines that under his leadership, WHO would do 'everything possible to put mental health at the top of the international development agenda'. His manifesto states that 'increased attention to mental health will feature prominently' in his agenda.

No candidate discussed mental health in their Director-General Forum presentations.

Given the sizable mental health-related global burden of disease^{8,9}, its importance in determining other comorbid health outcomes, and the historical neglect of mental health, we feel it is crucial that the core content of the WHO Director-General's vision for leadership displays a specific commitment to mental health. Currently, although some candidates make mention of mental health, none gives a sufficiently clear and committed vision for how to achieve improved global mental health. We strongly urge this perspective is taken into account when electing the next WHO Director-General.

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